

WASHINGTON -- A bill aimed at bringing more community voices to the local radio dial, co-authored by Rep. Lee Terry, is headed to the House floor after receiving committee approval.

The House Energy and Commerce Committee agreed Thursday to advance the legislation, which would allow for more low-power FM radio stations that broadcast to neighborhoods and small towns.

A low-power radio station can be a powerful communication tool for local community groups, clergy and others, said Terry, R-Neb.

Omaha's Wes Hall, CEO of Suntaman Communications, has been working for years to start such a station in Omaha.

Hall said that the large commercial radio stations are focused on turning a profit.

"A community radio station allows for a voice for the people and different organizations who are trying to remedy some of the community problems," he said.

The Federal Communications Commission cleared the way for the stations in 2000, but commercial radio stations raised concern that the new stations would interfere with existing transmissions.

Congress responded by establishing a buffer zone around existing commercial stations -- three clicks of the radio dial in both directions. Terry's bill would shrink that buffer zone to two clicks both ways.

That may seem like a small change, but it's expected to open up opportunities for thousands of new stations throughout the country, Terry said.

In the Omaha area, the change may result in only one or two open slots, Terry said.

Still, Hall said that different groups could work together to start a station and divide up the air time available.

Various Nebraska churches and organizations, including the group 100 Black Men of Omaha, have expressed interest in low-power radio, according to Terry.

He worked with Rep. Mike Doyle, D-Pa., on the legislation, which still has some obstacles before reaching the president's desk and becoming law.

New stations will have to be approved by the FCC, and Hall said it would probably take at least six months to a year to set up a station.

"It's not an overnight process," he said.

The National Association of Broadcasters has opposed the legislation over continuing concerns that the new stations will step on existing transmissions.

The group has criticized a 2003 study that found the changes in the legislation could be accomplished without significant risk of interference with existing signals.

Terry said Thursday that there is no evidence to support concerns about interference.

"The reality is it's not about the interference, but probably about competition," he said.

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